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ABSTRACT

Communicative competence often remains the aim rather than the product of language instruction. One cause may be the fact that language learners tend to need "knowledge of second language use" more than "knowledge of a second language" in their oral communication situations outside the classroom. This results in low transferability of interactional skills acquired through participation in the spoken discourse of second language classrooms. One suggestion for language teachers is the identification of those communicative purposes students have or will have in English. Another is the creation of as many and as varied opportunities as possible for learners to communicate inside the classroom, for purposes as similar as possible to those which they will have outside. (AM)

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ENCOURAGING LANGUAGE ACQUISITION BY ADULTS IN A FORMAL INSTRUCTIONAL SETTING - Michael Long

ONE SORT of language teaching to have benefited from work in applied linguistics in recent years is that to adults requiring English for specific purposes (ESP), be they academic, vocational or a mixture of the two. An increasing amount of course-design is based on careful study of the uses to which learners will put the new language after formal instruction in it, and a lot has been done to describe in communicative terms the areas of language and language skills identified as necessary to satisfy students' communication needs. 'General' courses cannot, by definition, be so specific about the linguistic content of what they teach or about the communicative purposes of heterogenous groups of learners; here, too, however, there appears to be a sharper awareness of the significance of an emphasis on listening, speaking, reading or writing, and of the communicative purposes these may serve. With specific reference to courses designed to provide learners with relevant oral-aural communication skills, it is the purpose of this article to identify practices which often cause communicative competence to remain the aim rather than the product of language instruction and thereby threaten to undermine the value of the developments indicated. Some suggestions will be offered for helping students to transfer knowledge of English acquired inside language classrooms to situations outside which involve them in language use.

A phenomenon familiar to many classroom teachers (myself included) is that of students who consistently produce grammatically and (sometimes) phonologically accurate sentences during one phase of a lesson, only to revert to sub-standard forms when the focus of attention has shifted to a new language item or to the 'content' of what the forms are being used to express, or when the student is later engaged in speaking English outside the classroom. Few people still believe this to reflect the formation of an insufficiently strong new language habit, but the problem largely remains one that is recognised rather than understood. A potential explanation for the 'regression' is provided by Krashen's 'monitor theory', (Krashen, 1976 a; 1976 b, and references cited therein), according to which 'adult second language learners concurrently develop two possibly independent systems for second language performance, one acquired, developed in ways similar to first language acquisition in children, and the other learned, developed consciously and most often in formal situations' (Krashen, 1976 b, p 1). I conceptualise Krashen's 'systems', acquired and learned, respectively, as embodying knowledge of second language use, induced, on a par with child language, from exposure to samples of language in use, and knowledge of the second language, developed, as Krashen says, 'consciously', as the result of formal instruction. Given that, by definition, most second language instruction is designed to develop the learned system, this is the one likely to be more advanced in those students having little contact with English outside the classroom. Hence, if students show a tendency to produce poorer-quality English in terms of formal accuracy when acting in informal situations, it is presumably because they are utilising their more restricted acquired system in such situations. In fact, this line of reasoning concurs with Krashen's view of productive performance. He posits 'a model in which adult linguistic production in second languages is made possible by the acquired system, with the learned system acting only as a monitor. The monitor, when conditions permit, inspects and often alters the output of the acquired systems.' (Ibid.)

Viewed in this light, our learners' seemingly inconsistent behaviour may be interpreted as follows. One of the conditions necessary for the monitor to operate is time. During comfortably paced controlled practice of a language item (as in the early stages of many drill sequences), sufficient is available for careful attention to be paid to the formal accuracy of isolated sentences. Thus, students remember, for example, to insert the 'do' auxiliary in Do you like Montreal? Minutes later, required to respond promptly in a speeded drill or, interacting informally, pressured by the presence of a waiting listener, monitoring time is lacking and an interlingual form (You have a car?) reappears. On other occasions time may be available but monitoring be preempted by over-loading of the learners' attention span, the intrinsic interest of subject-matter proving too great to allow concentration on the grammatically correct encoding of messages.

Both factors, time and limitations of attention span, are more likely to intervene adversely when language is put to use for communicative purposes. By definition, new information is transmitted or received, and so, distinct from many classroom language-learning activities, language use, too, becomes unpredictable or 'creative' in Chomsky's sense. A distinction needs to be drawn, however, between written and spoken language use. Because reading and writing are normally activities undertaken by individuals working alone, they are usually performed at a pace determined by the language user, and so permit monitoring in the form of rereading and editing. (Dictation, note-taking, and some forms of directed reading for information constitute three of several important exceptions). Oral communication, on the other hand, almost always takes place in the presence of other participants, and so often proceeds at a pace which the second language user is unable to negotiate to his or her satisfaction.

Insofar as it is primarily acquired competence upon which our students draw when engaged in oral language use, for the purpose of enabling them to participate in face-to-face interaction language-learning opportunities can be seen to be less relevant to their communicative needs than uses of the classroom environment which encourage English to be acquired. Assuming, justifiably in the case of most adults, that their studies are motivated by some present or anticipated communicative needs, and given that, by and large, people do something better the more practice they have had at doing it in the past, the two principal tasks of teachers and/or the latter's supporting team of curriculum planners, syllabus designers and materials writers may, therefore, be defined as:

1. the identification of those communicative purposes students have or are going to have for English

and

2. the creation of as many and as varied opportunities as possible for learners to communicate inside the classroom, for purposes as similar as possible to those which they will have outside.

Stated in this fashion, the language-teaching operation looks deceptively simple, yet the two tasks would seem to constitute the essential elements of ESP programmes, ie needs identification followed by the planning of relevant language-acquisition experiences. If so, then in practice ESP, like 'general' English courses, sometimes loses sight of its goals. Those which start with a careful study of learners' needs usually proceed to a vast amount of complex and sophisticated 'interference' (Newmark, 1966) in the acquisition process, both in the ways in which language skills and areas of English identified as necessary to fulfil students' needs are presented and in the ways in which students are allowed to acquire those skills and areas of language.

'Interference' takes many familiar forms, including selection and grading, the preparation of materials especially designed for language teaching, various forms of classroom organisation, (predominantly the 'lockstep'), a general pedagogic focus on language form rather than use (evidenced, for example, by the teacher's provision of large amounts of feedback on the grammatical accuracy, but seldom the communicative effectiveness, of student's language performance), and the utilisation of an ingenious variety of activities designed for language teaching and learning. The latter include the drilling of sentence patterns, translation into and out of the students' native language(s), the manipulation of verb-tenses, and so on. That these practises are unnecessary for successful second-language acquisition to occur is evidenced by the countless numbers of people, children and adults, who master new languages without the aid of formal instruction. That the vast majority of them are optional components of formal instruction, too, is shown by a feature analysis of those methods of language teaching known to have been successful (Krashen and Seliger, 1975). The investigators found (i) the isolation of rules and lexical items of the target language and (ii) the possibility of error detection or correction to be the only elements common to all such methods. The justification, if any, for most interfering practices must lie, therefore, in their complementing what is necessary and sufficient for second language learning by making the process more efficient, and that, in turn, learned competence is sufficiently useful to specific kinds of adult students to compensate for any negative effects on language acquisition caused by the learning process.

In fact it is doubtful whether some traditional language-teaching activities do assist adult students to learn English, or at least do so in the ways supposed. An example is provided by some recent studies of the teacher's treatment of learner error, eg Fanselow (1974), Allwright (1975a), Lucas (1975), McTear (1975b),

Richards (1975), papers collected in Allwright (1975c) and Long (in preparation). Several writers report (1) the enormous variety of feedback given to learners on their performance, (2) its extreme complexity and lack of system, and (3) the unlikelihood that many students could possibly benefit from such 'help'. The findings are tentative, however, and still at the descriptive stage. Much more research is needed to determine the precise effects on student achievement of, for example, a teaching strategy of ignoring student errors of language form or of location as opposed to identification of error. Making one charge of this sort in normal teaching practice would be unlikely seriously to damage student learning. Whether found to be harmful, to make no difference, or to have a beneficial effect, the continued use or disappearance of various types of feedback would have a proven basis. Our current state of ignorance, meanwhile, makes it impossible to support most suggestions for change empirically, and theorists would do well to remember Mackey's observation: 'While sciences have advanced by approximations in which each new state results from an improvement, not a rejection, of what has gone before, language-teaching methods have followed the pendulum of fashion from one extreme to the other' (Mackey, 1965, 138).

Whatever the contributions to language learning made by the various forms of interfering activities mentioned, it is arguable that they reduce opportunities for relevant acquisition to take place. The chief way in which this may be thought to occur is through the creation, by attempts to induce language learning, of language data - in the form of a highly specialised discourse of second-language classrooms - very different from those later to be encountered by the student. This, in turn, results in low transferability of interactional skills acquired through participation in the spoken discourse of second language classrooms.*

As has been shown to be the case in 'content' subjects (Sinclair and Coulthard, 1975), the discourse of second-language classrooms is highly structured and complex. Language itself being the focus of attention, it is even more difficult for students to 'take charge' and initiate interaction than would be the case in, say, a social studies lesson. Teacher talk tends to predominate and teachers do a large amount of structuring of conversation, of asking 'questions' and of reacting in various ways to what students say in reply. The students' task is generally to respond either to their teacher's soliciting moves or to those of materials writers. The scope of what they say is severely limited not so much by their knowledge of English as by the fact that language practice is controlled in other ways. Very often, for example, they are required to verbalise their thoughts, using a given structure or verb-tense, and even slight lexical changes are indicated for them. In language drills the above constraints apply especially strictly, and, with the focus on form, use is sometimes shown the door:

T: What am I doing now?

S: You're standing.

T: I'm standing. Good.

It is generally understood that it is not what students say that is important but how they say it; the teacher's attention (and, therefore, the students' own) is usually on linguistic accuracy rather than communicative effectiveness.

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*Several writers have described characteristics of certain areas of written discourse, notably the language of science textbooks, as well as problems involved in the preservation of those characteristics in materials prepared for students of English. See, eg Widdowson (1973; 1976), Mackay (1974), Mountford (1975) and Castaños (in press). The following remarks will be confined to spoken interaction in second language classrooms.

Given that much language practice is carried out 'lockstep', ie by the teacher and the class working together as one group even if individual students are called upon to respond, time is at a premium, as boredom would quickly set in if public conversations developed between the teacher and one student or student and student while others waited their turn. What students say, therefore, needs to be said promptly and is generally limited to one or two isolated sentences at a time, preferably short so that memories will not be overloaded. Patterns in the interaction develop (with slight variations), a particularly common one being (1) a teacher-soliciting move (often in the form of a 'question' to which s/he and the students already know the answer), (2) the nomination of a student to respond, (3) that student's response, (4) a reaction by the teacher (usually to the form of what the student has said, rarely to the substance), and (5) the use of a nod, the repetition of the student's response (when correct), a 'praise' marker, or a combination of the three to indicate that the student's turn to speak is over. The pattern recurs even in quasi-communicative work:

T: What helps man to use tools?

S_1: Uh the five fingers uh -

T: The fifth finger.

S_1: The fifth finger..

T: Are there other animals that also have five fingers?

S_2: The primates.

T: The primates. Yes.

In conditions like these it is clearly going to be difficult for students to induce rules about how utterances take on rhetorical value and coherence according to their situation in continuous discourse. Even textually cohesive devices, intersentential linkers, anaphoric reference, and so on, are rarely needed by learners whose speech seldom spans series of sentences. In the kind of interaction described, the input data are chiefly sentences and what is most easily acquired a sentence grammar. Some rules of discourse in second-language classrooms are induced, including complex ones governing rapid and subtle shifts in and out of different levels of language use. This example of language acquisition often goes unnoticed until the rules break down:

T: Where are you from? Where are you from?

SSS: We're from Venezuela.....

T: Say the sentence: Where are you from.

SSS: Where are you from?

(Example from McTear, 1975a, 106.)

In general, verbal interaction in second-language classrooms is clearly very different from that in which students will have to participate after instruction is over. Games are played, as they are in spontaneous conversation, but the games are governed by rules, unique to the setting. The classroom frequently houses a very skilful kind of circus act in which a ringmaster, the teacher, specialises in setting up a series of hoops through which learners are taught to jump in linguistic safety. Experienced teachers become especially adept not only at choosing language-practice exercises that are within the range of their students' knowledge of English but even at selecting and grading their small amount of genuinely communicative use of the target language, as when instructions are given or other management activities performed. In effect, teachers are often sufficiently in control of what is going on to do a special kind of 'monitoring' signed to spin a protective cocoon of familiar language around their charges.

It is arguable that skilful editing of this sort, like the greater part of classroom language practice, protects students from the real linguistic world and, in the long run, makes their transition into it more difficult. Students are, in effect, prepared to deal with the discourse of language classrooms; for this is a datum to which they are exposed; to the extent that it is different from the discourse of their target situations they will have difficulty in transferring their knowledge.

It is doubtful, however, whether changes in the input data, in the form of especially designed teaching materials, are alone sufficient to ensure a closer approximation in the classroom to the discourse of students' target situations - and hence, to procure a lesser transfer problem. Phillipps and Shettlesworth undertook a study of spoken discourse in classrooms where ESP materials, including some designed for the teaching of English for occupational purposes*, were being used, and that of others using a general English course** (Phillips and Shettlesworth, 1975). Several of their findings are pertinent to the present discussion. They noted 'an emphasis on the production of whole sentences for formal correctness', 'semantic distortion on the teacher's part in an attempt to meet the demands of the exercise material', 'teachers' acceptance of replies with "fine", "good", etc, which serve to cut off further communication', and, more generally, that 'there is a tendency for the discourse to approximate to genuine discourse only when familiar material is being handled. New material results in a disproportionate increase in teacher-talking time . . . The problem here seems to be that the teacher is teaching materials designed for teaching rather than providing the student with strategies for dealing with genuine materials.' (Ibid, 9).

They are sceptical of the effectiveness of some ESP courses as they are commonly used in classrooms: 'Our analysis of the samples of discourse engendered by these courses leads us to the conclusion that they all tend to structure the lesson in a similar manner; this suggests, therefore, that the ESP courses at least are failing in their intent . . .' (Ibid, 7).

It seems that there are other, more fundamental characteristics of classroom instruction which preempt student participation in discourse more relevant to their communicative needs, and I have argued elsewhere (Long, 1975) for consideration of classroom organisation as one such characteristic. More recently, with Mexican university students as subjects, an experiment was carried out to test the effects of the use of the small group as an alternative to lockstep teaching when the learning task, so designed as to facilitate genuinely communicative use of language by students, was the same in both conditions***. It was found that the number of pedagogical moves, (focusing discussion, summarising, moving conversation on to a new topic, etc), of social skills, (competing for the floor, interrupting, inviting participation by others, etc), of rhetorical acts, predicting, hypothesising, deducing, etc),

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* Industrial English, British Council, Tabriz. The target discourse was 'The English required for communication in the factory situation' (Phillips and Shettlesworth, 1975, 4).

** Success with English: The Penguin Course, Geoffrey Broughton. Penguin Books, 1968.

*** For a full account of the experiment, together with details of the instrument developed to code the verbal interaction recorded, see Long, Adams, McLean and Castaños, (1976). For a discussion of some of the problems inherent in systems for analysing the discourse of classroom language learning, see McLean and Castaños (1976). The learning task in the Xochimilco experiment had students decide, on the basis of discussion, which of a list of characteristics, (tool-using, the possession of language, intelligence, etc), presented to them were peculiar to man and which were found in other animals.

and total number of moves performed by students working in the small-group condition was significantly higher than those by students in the lockstep condition. More interestingly, the variety of pedagogical moves and social skills and the total varieties of moves was also significantly greater in the small group condition.*

Several questions arise from these findings. Would the same changes in quality of discourse occur in larger small groups (pairs in our experiment), with students at beginning and advanced levels of proficiency in the target language (our subjects were at the intermediate level) and over different types of learning tasks? Also, can discourse with something approaching the characteristics of that found in the small-group condition be achieved in large groups of students without the teacher's presence or in small groups with the teacher present? Research is needed on these and other issues. Meanwhile, the findings of the experiment reported here, like the Phillips and Shettlesworth study, support the idea that mere exposure of students to more realistic samples of language use in the form of specially written teaching materials is insufficient to guarantee opportunities for communication inside the classroom for purposes similar to those which students will have outside:

T: Ask him.

S: What thinks about the of the intelligent of the monkeys?

T: What do you think of the intelligence of the monkeys?

S: Will you repeat me, please?

T: What do you think about the intelligence of monkeys. Repeat your question, César.

S: What think . . .

T: What do you think.

S: What do you think about of the inteiligent of the monkeys?

Implicit in the discussion so far, and now made explicit, is the suggestion that relevant experiences for adults undergoing formal instruction in English need to include their being placed in problem-solving situations where the bridging of an 'information gap' will require communicative use of the target language on their parts. If, thereby, learners are thrust into situations for which they do not possess all the linguistic equipment (eg vocabulary) desirable, then the experience may be that much more valuable, for it is one they will constantly face in the real world. The fact that in the absence of monitoring, learners often communicate successfully with interlingual forms, even when the interlocutor is another non-native speaker of English, serves to remind us that communicative performance in a second language need not presuppose a linguistic ability to construct grammatically correct sentences. In its absence, whether explicitly taught or not, learners will develop interactional survival strategies - avoidance, paraphrase, stalling, guessing and so on** - and use these to negotiate verbal encounters for which they might, to their teacher, seem unready. How successful they will be when obliged to resort to such devices outside classrooms

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* The variety of rhetorical acts performed by students in the small groups was also greater than that by students in the lockstep condition, but the difference was just short of significant at the .05 level.

**These and other strategies are, of course, also used by native speakers, eg when they encounter interlocutors with wider vocabularies or greater familiarity with certain subject-matter than they themselves possess.

will, in part, be a function of past experience of engaging in communicative use of English during formal instruction.

Exposure to such opportunities for relevant language acquisition to take place is, as the experience of informal second-language acquirers attests, necessary and sufficient for successful participation in face-to-face interaction. Whether it alone constitutes optimally efficient language instruction is unknown, given that no programme reported so far has had 'non-interference', in the sense used here, as its only characteristic for the whole period of second language acquisition. However, Newmark's well-known 'minimal language-teaching program' at the University of California's San Diego Campus, (Newmark, 1971), and the University of Essex Programme (Allwright, 1975, and this issue of ELT Documents), seem good candidates for examples of non-interference for part of the second language-acquisition process in adults. In Newmark's programme, students acquire English as a second language through exposure to samples of the language, whole quantities at a time, the quantities not having been tampered with in the usual way by materials writers or classroom teachers. Students are encouraged to consult a pedagogic grammar of English outside class-hours, but in class receive no formal instruction of the normal kinds. Instead, activities consist of conversation practice in small groups, studying dialogues in the language laboratory, extensive reading and discussions of language and language learning. Both the San Diego and Essex programmes involve relatively sophisticated, highly motivated university students (presumably, in the North American case, and as expressly stated by Allwright) with some knowledge of the target language, undertaking 'remedial' work in a second language environment.* Until evidence of the effects of complete non-interference becomes available** a cautious approach (whereby non-volunteer or paying students' interests would be safeguarded) could comprise instruction one of whose components consisted of opportunities for relevant second language acquisition. An example of such a programme is that, in Mexico City, of the Foreign Language Department at the Autonomous Metropolitan University's Xochimilco campus.

Starting in the first five hours of instruction for mixed classes of complete and false beginners, some classroom time is set aside for the playing of 'communication games' of the kind described by Allwright. In one such game, for example, hidden by a cardboard screen, one member of a pair of students arranges a series of cardboard geometrical figures of various shapes and colours into a pattern of his or her own creation. She then gives instructions to the second member of the pair, on the other side of the screen, as to how s/he should arrange an identical set of shapes to form the same pattern. The second student requests further information whenever the first student's instructions are unclear or ambiguous***. The following is a transcribed fragment of the language produced by two students after four hours of instruction in English, working on the geometrical figures task.

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*None of these advantageous circumstances in any way invalidates their achievements, of course; indeed, with increasing numbers of university students from overseas, the conditions are fairly typical. There is, as Krashen and Seliger (ibid, 175) have pointed out, however, an additional problem in taking Newmark's programme as a case of total non-interference, namely, his reference to the optimal private consultation by students of a traditional grammar of English. One would like to know whether this was an option taken up by all or any of the San Diego students.

**This could be obtained from experimental programmes with volunteer students.

***Fuller descriptions of this and other 'communication games', as well as discussions of some of their strengths and weaknesses, may be found in Long and Castaños (1976) and Gutierrez and Long, (1976).

S_1: Take the rectangle take the rectangle the triangle excuse me take the triangle.

S_2: Which triangle?

S_1: With the ... with the rombo*, and put it er above above the the triangle.

S_2: Which triangle?

S_1: With the ... small yellow square. Take the triangle with ... answer**... with (inaudible) and put it below the rectangle.

S_2: The rectangle.

S_1: OK.

With the repetitions, hesitations, false starts, changes of direction, etc, the fragment is readily seen for what it is, language in use for communication, and not simply the communicatively purposeless rehearsal of practised verbal formulae. If the argument of this paper is correct, it is also an example of a vital part of formal instruction in English as a second language for adults, namely, use of the classroom as an environment which will encourage and permit relevant language acquisition to take place.

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* Rombo: Spanish for 'diamond'.

** One of the triangles had a question mark (?) on it.

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